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THE MOVIES AS DOPE

BY ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL

WE have heard more than is endurable of the menace of the movies to our morals. Sinners for centuries managed to find a way to perdition without them, and the professional uplifter, whatever his subject, has a terrible faculty for becoming a bore. But we have not heard anything like enough of the menace of the movies to our intellect, though they threaten to deprive us of what little we already have. Men took to morality instinctively as soon as they lived in herds. They had to for self-protection. As instinctively, they shrank from thought which was less essential and more trouble. Learning to think was a slow and laborious undertaking. Learning not to think is proving a swift and congenial task and the shortest cut to success has been supplied by the movies.

If occasionally a courageous critic admits that the movies are not quite what they ought to be intellectually, he makes up for it by splendid prophesies of what they are going to be. Dr. Einstein, struggling to say something we could understand, complimented us on the wonderful "instruction in science and the presentment of artistic plays" we shall have from our movies, once they emerge from their infancy. Sir Sidney Low, more deferential, exalts the American movies as they are into models for the English cinema, if it is to realize its "possibility of great art" and "lift itself clear of vulgarity and mere profit-mongering." The modest American asks for not more than twenty-five years, millions behind him, and a free foot, to put "the American-made motion-pictures on a level with the highest products in the other arts." But only the rosiest of rose-colored glasses could reveal any reason for this optimism. Without the help of ouija or crystal, disaster may safely be predicted for the manager who thinks to secure his punch in scientific or artistic novelties. Millions and time have already been behind the movies. The

feet of everybody involved have known no fetters save those imposed by our self-appointed guardians whose pleasure is in depriving other people of theirs. The manufacture of films is a colossal industry; the building set up for their display is often the Picture Palace it calls itself; their stock has been floated in Wall Street. So far from the movies being in their infancy, they have reached full maturity and in attaining it have delivered themselves from all temptation to linger in the arid by-paths of science and art. They did yield in their irresponsible youth, and no inducement to repeat the experiment has come of it. The moving-pictures, in their first stage of innocence, as they were developing from an experiment into a fixture, were all for instruction and information and edification. Amusement did not enter into their programme. There was no Charlie Chaplin, no Mary Pickford. Audiences were expected to sit stolidly through a performance, improving their minds without one little smile in the process. Even when drama gradually crept in, it was designed to teach a lesson rather than to cheer an idle moment.

But instruction and information and edification could not have paid, for they have dwindled into side issues—except in the lecture hall and school room where they still remain, the sugar coating to help dry facts go down. In the Picture Palace amusement has the monopoly, the play is the thing. It would be hard to grudge anybody whatever amusement is to be had anywhere or anyhow in a land given over to blue laws and dryness; only the Puritan would condemn a play simply because it is a play. The individual has the right to manage his affairs for himself, so long as he does not interfere with his neighbor; even to the sacrifice of intelligence, should he be so foolish as to find it necessary to his happiness. When his morals do interfere with his neighbor, there are prisons to shut him up in, but there are none for the individual who threatens to pass his unintelligent standard of happiness on to the crowd and who is, therefore, the greater danger of the two in a democracy like ours supposed to be ruled by the crowd. Should the movies retain and strengthen their hold upon the public, the thoughtful citizen may well be alarmed for the future of his country, indeed of the world if, as Mr. Hard-

ing has told us, to the world these great United States are a warning and an example.

Further reflection must add to the alarm of the thoughtful citizen. For if the movies are the thing of the moment, the reason of their popularity has its roots deep down in human nature, dating back to the very beginning—to primeval days when man no sooner lived as man than life bored him so unutterably that, at once, he set about inventing a way to forget it. He might have forgotten in work, but work was no less a bore, or perhaps a worse one—the primeval curse. In his need, he hit with surprising swiftness upon the play, at the start as crude as himself, but still the make-believe, the something that did not exist, for which he could exchange the something that did. Whatever philosophers and ethnologists may say, it was man's colossal capacity for boredom that prompted him to fill his universe with imaginary terrors, to surround himself with disturbing spiritual beings, to allow the affairs of an unseen world to distract him from more immediate duties in his own, and, finally, as a means of communication with the unknown, the unseen, to evolve a ceremonial which was really the first dramatic form he gave to his make-believe.

Indolence long kept men in the world they knew nothing about for their make-believe. Gods and goddesses continued to be heroes and heroines for the Greek dramatist, their adventures his theme. The Miracle Play was the popular drama of the Middle Ages. The sacred dance at Seville, the Passion Play at Ober-Ammergau, serve as reminders of the religious origin of the theatre. But the drama, with time, drifted reluctantly away from religion, just as now it is drifting joyously away from art. Not that the people ever felt any interest in, or indeed were conscious of, the art that inspired it. But when their make-believe was to be had only from the artist, they were obliged to put up with his art if they wanted any make-believe at all, and they did want it so unquestioningly that the drama as an art became a tradition not yet quite outworn. Molière can still fill the Comédie Française, Shakespeare can still make the English actor's reputation. Goethe is still a fetish in Germany. All the same, in the greatest days of dramatic art as in the crudest and most degener-

ate, it has been not art, but the love of make-believe that has driven people to the play, the desire to throw off the boredom of the real for the enchantment of the unreal.

The drama opens the door into another life, another world. Comfortably settled in their seats, audiences can let real life slip from them as they watch on the stage the life that never was. It is the triumph of make-believe—a triumph with which art is so little concerned that people had only to be told that they did not want art in the theatre to accept its loss without a murmur. Tragedy was replaced by melodrama and, always sheep, they flocked to it. Comedy was merged into musical extravaganza called by its name, and they rejoiced. The revue succeeded to farce and they could not have enough of it. And then, crowning achievement of modern progress, photography captured the drama, and the happiness of the people was complete; and so also, incidentally, was the degradation of dramatic art.

For photography is not, never can be, art. That it may be of service to art, no one would deny. But the camera, whatever its virtues, cannot compete with the artist. It cannot create, it cannot compose or design. The photographer selects his subject, he does not arrange it. He plants his machine where he chooses, the machine does the work, and what the machine manufactures is a record of fact. Now that it can record even the fact of movement, its use is not to be exaggerated—neither, unfortunately is its abuse.

Cinematographic reports of life in motion have a practical value. But the attempt to photograph art in motion—dramatic art—is as foolish as the attempt to make Rembrandts and Whistlers out of photographs of people and places. For the dramatic artist fills the stage not with life, but with the semblance of life. The actor is the dramatist's tool as the brush is the painter's; the actor's movements and spoken words are the symbols by which the dramatist conveys his illusion, works out the well-ordered sequence of events, and expresses the character, emotion and thought which are the essentials of his art, as the painter with his brush renders the color, the form, and the line which are the essentials of his. The movements of the painter's brush on the films could suggest scarcely less of the finished

painting than the movements of the actor suggest of the written play. The life breathed into a drama by dramatist and actor eludes the camera, and the photographic version on the screen is no more than a skeleton, and a distorted skeleton at that, its offensiveness increasing in proportion to its endeavor to pass itself off as real flesh-and-blood—as the “high art product” predicted for the future. In the cheaper movies it is easy to laugh at the cowboy, smuggler and vendetta stunts, the pistols and poison, the breakneck rides and hairbreadth escapes, the wholesale massacres and sticky sentiment, for they have no more pretension to art than the spooks and murders of the old London penny gaff, or the blood and thunder of the dime novel. The screen’s adaptations of second-rate plays and second-rate tales may also be dismissed lightly, so little art was there in them originally to be debased. But in the great play or the great novel there is art, and its capture by the movies is the unpardonable sin, though a sin borne with equanimity in our sorry scheme of things which makes it a crime to drink a glass of beer. Nor can any possible millennium of the movies, any miraculous improvement of the cinematograph, bring with it the grace of pardon for the unpardonable. The evil is in the prostitution of art to the machine-made, and the cinematograph might develop into the supreme mechanical marvel, the eighth wonder of the world, and in its super-perfection it would still be a machine, and a machine can only create the machine-made. It may reproduce the scene on the stage, but this is a detail, an important detail it is true, but in itself meaningless, lifeless, needing the dramatist’s words in the actor’s mouth to give it life. The camera has not been, could not be invented, that would photograph the rhythmical reason for the presence of the Greek Chorus, or the melancholy of Jacques, or the cynicism of Hamlet, or the faint loveliness of Pelleas and Mélisande—that would supply the clue to that inevitable sequence of events upon which the tragedy or comedy hinges, or to the character, the emotion, the thought that the actor’s movements and poses of themselves alone could not express. To the man who has not read Hardy or Stevenson, the screen would convey nothing of the meaning and therefore the beauty of *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Duse, in the movies, could sadden no one with the sentiment of Dumas Fils, enchant no one with the gaiety of Goldoni. Yvette Guilbert, in the best motion picture ever made, could not let us see with her La Soularde reeling, or hear with her the horror in the bells her voice sets ringing. I know that a film of explanation is offered as a substitute for the written or spoken word, but it seldom explains anything save the illiteracy of its author and the shame of all concerned. And the second machine expected in the near future to do the talking will only make the second state of the film masterpiece worse than the first, for then there will be two machines instead of one to massacre the original. Even the play without words is too subtle for the restrictions imposed on movement, gesture and expression, and the screen would transform a pantomime as exquisite as *L'Enfant Prodigue* into burlesque.

It is not more terrible for the artist who allows his work to be vulgarized than for the people who accept its vulgarization as art. Trained by the photo-play, they lose all sense, all appreciation of dramatic art, just as the man brought up on cheap chromos is spoilt for the Louvre, or the man accustomed to the gramophone for opera, or the concert hall. The tradition of dramatic art has endured until now, if with difficulty, but it cannot endure much longer. It is being smothered, killed by the growing indifference of people whose palate has been coarsened by a surfeit of machine-made plays, until they can no longer distinguish between art and the photograph that masquerades as art. And dramatic art, when it passes away, will not go alone. Thought will fly with it. If the drama from the start has been popular because it helps men, as nothing else can, to stop thinking about real life, it has never let them off from thinking altogether. What it does is simply to transfer thought from real life to life on the stage. In its lighter forms the thought it invokes is as light. In melodramas, revues and vaudeville where art, if it does not disappear, is reduced to a minimum, thought dwindles with it, and I doubt if a drug has yet been discovered more powerful as a sedative than a London Music Hall performance. And yet, however artless and innocuous the performance, so long as the performers are flesh and blood—men and women—a gesture, an

inflection of the voice, a chance movement may rouse the least willing from his torpor to a conscious realization of meaning in the scene before him. At the movies the addict, swallowing his solid dose of the make-believe of make-believe, runs no such risk. The movies are worse than a sedative—they are dope, pure dope, the most deadly ever invented. Only shadows appear on the screen, moving with an abruptness, a haste, that leaves no time to wonder why they move at all. The films give something to look at, nothing to think about, and something to look at without thought stupefies, hypnotizes. Vacancy of mind prepares for the hypnotic state and, staring at the screen, the modern lotus-eater drifts easily and placidly into the land where it is always afternoon, achieves Nirvana far sooner than the Hindu Yogi starving and staring at his middle.

Apathy is agreeable, but of small use in a world where work must be done, no matter in how few hours or for what high wages. It is because the movies encourage this apathetic state, fast making it the national condition, that they are more demoralizing than Bolshevism to the proletariat and intellectuals alike. None save the tireless and tiresome uplifter would bother about them as a snare to innocence. The morals of humanity have not survived every trap laid by the ages to be lost in the Picture Palace. For the man led into temptation by the movies, the only safe place would be a prison or a monastery. If the boy can be so easily plunged into a life of crime, Robin Hood, or Dick Turpin, would long since have bred too many outlaws for the pictures of outlawry to have a chance. The child, now initiated into sex problems in the nursery, is not likely to be dismayed by the revelations of the photo-play. As a snare to intellect, however, the danger of the movies cannot be overdrawn. The evil they work is not in any challenge to active iniquity, but in the state of Nirvana into which they seduce their audience—in the deadening of all feeling for art, the stifling of all tendency to thought. The uneducated, without the movies, may never have known either the feeling or the tendency. But the educated are supposed to cultivate both, and if they are caught fast in the snare, then thought and art are at an end. Excuse for interest may at first have been the profitable instruction to be gained from the movies, but

interest has strengthened as profitable instruction has shrunk until now it is all but done away with. That the classes called educated are interested is a fact not to be disputed, the proofs are too obvious. The greater luxury in the large Picture Palaces and their high price of admission show where patrons are sought—and not in vain. The play that succeeds on the stage seeks second success on the films. The actors of most repute all over the world reappear as screen stars, or “silent sirens” as one lyrical admirer, who ought to know better, has lately labelled them. The most correct theatres at times open their stage doors to the movies. Academies of Music and Opera Houses give them occasional shelter that pays. The first night of a photo-play is one of the season’s social events, its dress rehearsal an envied function for the privileged few. The dramatic critic notices it with portentous solemnity, the most important papers in the country spare it as much space as a new book or a new opera. The latest screen novelty rivals the latest novel or picture show as a subject for polite conversation. *Main Street* and *The Age of Innocence* are not more solemnly discussed at afternoon tea than *Down East* and *The Three Musketeers*, nor Strauss and Debussy more approved names at the polite dinner table than Fairbanks and Chaplin.

A fashion, it may be said, and fashions pass; yes, but sometimes they pass into fixed habits, and already the movies have so undermined the people’s power of thinking that religion and education have begun to play down to them in the struggle for survival. Clergymen, who would retain their congregations, suggest the introduction of the movies into the church service, and seek to fill their Sunday Schools by putting on the screen the Scriptures which the Christian once studied in fear and trembling lest he might not understand, and the scholar once read and re-read for sheer joy in the beauty of the language. Teachers advocate the adoption of the movies in secular schools that lessons may amuse the pupil’s eye instead of exercising the pupil’s mind. The old-fashioned teacher believed that the end of education was to teach the pupil how to think. But modern progress has carried us far beyond that ancient superstition, and children, whose intelligence has been already undermined by the movies

out of school, are to be further debauched by them in what should be hours of study. No wonder that the man with eyes to see is now watching with dismay the human race as it advances briskly along the highway back to illiteracy, fast drawing near to the day when the movies will deliver it even from the alphabet, and when the ultimate glory of twentieth century culture will be the return to the picture-writing in vogue before letters were invented. Then, it may be that, here and there in some remote monastic retreat, a few scholars—dry-as-dusts—will strive to save the archaic alphabet and the learning based upon it from vanishing entirely, as the monks of the Dark Ages, on their inaccessible hilltops and in their forgotten valleys, preserved the art and literature of an earlier period from crumbling away with the civilization of which they were the fairest flowering. The new monks will have a harder struggle of it than the old. For the highest ambition of the world, now made safe for democracy, is the most wholesale sweeping away ever undertaken of all and everything which the energies of centuries have been spent in perfecting and preserving as the best life has to give. It took centuries to develop the art of cookery, and to-day America lives on cold storage. It took centuries to develop the art of the musician, and to-day our pride is in canning his music. It took centuries to develop the art of the painter and the illustrator, and to-day we throw it to the camera. It took centuries to develop the art of the dramatist and the actor, and to-day we waste it on the films. It took centuries to develop the art of education, and to-day we strive to turn it into play. The small minority, however desperately it may cling to art and thought, will have but a meagre chance against the large majority hurrying along the shortest cut to that Earthly Paradise where no alphabet need be mastered for no one will read, where art and thought will be remembered only as the sad follies of the sad generations who lived before the blessing of the movies had fallen upon mankind.

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